



Highlights of [GAO-06-785](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, the Congress has become increasingly concerned that federal agencies are misclassifying information. Classified information is material containing national defense or foreign policy information determined by the U.S. government to require protection for reasons of national security. GAO was asked to assess the extent to which (1) DOE's training, guidance, and oversight ensure that information is classified and declassified according to established criteria and (2) DOE has found documents to be misclassified.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOE conduct a similar number of classification oversight reviews, at a similar depth of analysis, as it did before the October 2005 shift in responsibility for classification oversight; apply selection procedures that more randomly identify classified documents for review; and disclose these selection procedures in future classification inspection reports.

DOE agreed with GAO's three recommendations but asserted it was already taking actions and making plans to ensure that the classification oversight program remains effective. Although GAO is encouraged by DOE's efforts, until the agency establishes a record of accomplishment under the new organizational structure, it will not be clear whether oversight will be as effective as it has been.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-785.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise, 202-512-3841, aloise@gao.gov.

MANAGING SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Actions Needed to Ensure Recent Changes in DOE Oversight Do Not Weaken an Effective Classification System

What GAO Found

DOE's Office of Classification's systematic training, comprehensive guidance, and rigorous oversight programs had a largely successful history of ensuring that information was classified and declassified according to established criteria. However, an October 2005 shift in responsibility for classification oversight to the Office of Security Evaluations has created uncertainty about whether a high level of performance in oversight will be sustained. Specifically, prior to this shift, the Office of Classification had performed 34 inspections of classification programs at DOE sites since 2000. These inspections reviewed whether DOE sites complied with agency classification policies and procedures. After the October 2005 shift, however, the pace of this oversight was interrupted as classification oversight activities ceased until February 2006. So far in 2006, one classification oversight report has been completed for two offices at DOE's Pantex Site in Texas, and work on a second report is under way at four offices at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. More oversight inspections evaluating classification activity at eight DOE offices are planned for the remainder of 2006. In addition, according to the Director of the Office of Security Evaluations, the procedures for conducting future oversight are still evolving—including the numbers of sites to be inspected and the depth of analysis to be performed. If the oversight inspections planned for the remainder of 2006 are completed, it will demonstrate resumption in the pace of oversight conducted prior to October 2005. However, if these inspections are not completed, or are not as comprehensive as in the past, the extent and depth of oversight will be diminished and may result in DOE classification activities becoming less reliable and more prone to misclassification.

On the basis of reviews of classified documents performed during its 34 oversight inspections, the Office of Classification believes that very few of DOE's documents had been misclassified. The department's review of more than 12,000 documents between 2000 and 2005 uncovered 20 documents that had been misclassified—less than one-sixth of 1 percent. DOE officials believe that its misclassification rate is reasonable given the large volume of documents processed. Most misclassified documents remained classified, just not at the appropriate level or category. Of greater concern are the several documents that should have been classified but mistakenly were not. When mistakenly not classified, such documents may end up in libraries or on DOE Web sites where they could reveal classified information to the public. The only notable shortcomings we identified in these inspections were the inconsistent way the Office of Classification teams selected the classified documents for review and a failure to adequately disclose these procedures in their reports. Inspection teams had unfettered access when selecting documents to review at some sites, but at others they only reviewed documents from collections preselected by site officials. Office of Classification reports do not disclose how documents were selected for review.